

Taking the Oath

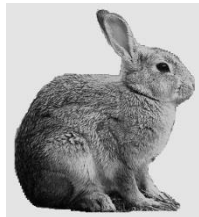
Tom French



Smithereens Press

Taking the Oath

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Smithereens Press 12

Taking the Oath

is first published by Smithereens Press

<http://smithereenspress.com>

on 14th February 2015.

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Cover image: ‘Tommy Loughran’s cricket boots’, by John Daly.

Author photograph by Éamon Little.

Text set in Calibri 12 point.

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Taking the Oath



Courtesy of Meath County Archive

Trench Art, Janeville

Had a Blessed Virgin been
all each shell had ever contained,
each sealed in her steel alcove,

I imagine the war - every bombardment
an Assumption; millions
of airborne Virgins

gaining on Heaven,
then coming to ground
head first in No Man's Land.

Now every roadside grotto will be
an unexploded shell
conceived on a grand scale,

where the bomb disposal units -
fathers, brothers, sons -
suited up, moving like moon men,

will kneel before lifting a hand,
and pray to set eyes
on their flesh and blood again.

Thaw

i.m. Paddy Maguire of Dunsany

You undo
shoelaces

and take off
socks to go

barefoot
through

paddocks
frosty in May

in the story
of your life;

and hoosh,
from where

they lay
all night,

to thaw out
your feet,

Herefords
and Friesians,

and the stray
Charolais.



Coalpits, Slane (photograph by the author)

Taking the Oath

The next night I waited
at the same spot.
When they came,
we crossed that field

into the next. I heard
a pond, the water bird
our coming frightened,
a rake of ducks

that took off,
screeching into the night.
When we stopped
I repeated what was said

to me, promising
my life, and, after,
thought more often
of the ducks, of how

tenderly, from field
to field, they'd led me,
than of the life I'd
taken on, or given up.

Hare

He was coming like an express
at the head of a string of cars
moving like a fast cortège,
his puffs of breath in my dims,

going at a good clip
when he crossed the broken
line to duck into the gap
between my lights.

Casing gave. The radiator
slowed him, but it took the bulk
of the engine block
to stop him in his tracks.

By our outside light
I lifted him free, in a slow
reversal of that impact -
bone in the steel, steel

in the bone - a fine buck,
strength in the haunches yet -
and bore him across our road
for the birds, supporting,

like a midwife, the head, the neck.

Altar Frontal, St. Paul's, 1919

The wounded assume
the instruments
of peace -

cups of tea,
thimbles and needles,
and spools of yarn -

to sew the edges
of the world
together again.

Here is a cup
of suffering
stitched into linen;

songbirds waiting
for a lull
to break into song.



*Mick Beggan (trainer), detail from Meath team photograph,
Croke Park, 1930 (from the McDermott collection)*

A Bible in Boyerstown

after Paddy Keely

They didn't think
Mick Beggan was listening,
until they came to the map
in the old Bible in the kitchen

of the wandering
of the Chosen People in
the Sinai Desert under
Moses for forty years.

*"I wondered myself
about those lot.
Where did they go to?
Or what were they at?*

*We marched from Cairo
to Jerusalem
in six weeks under Allenby
in nineteen-seventeen."*

Rose Lee's 'Union Jack'

Is she making a flag
for the war dead to raise
maimed limbs to foreheads
to salute, assembling -

like a negative or replica,
in the form of a flag of war
left out on the green for years
for the sun to bleach,

piece by piece - bolster
cases, bedspreads, sheets,
tablecloths she steps the breadth
of in her bare feet?

It is as if somebody has
deliberately admitted snow.
It mirrors the ceiling,
blankets the bare boards,

and covers the floor
from window to window.
It is an indoor field
and Rose Lee is gleaning

mourning locket, love
tokens, as the robin
on the *Robin Starch* can
alights, and looks on.

Charles Howard Bury

Not through the chalk soils of Picardy
but through mounds of the bodies of the slain,
Charles Howard Bury digs, and digging,
comes upon a pilgrim from Lhasa, moving

one body length at a time towards Kathmandu
in ritual prostration, beside whose body
Charles Howard Bury lays the bodies of the slain,
his own body, in the chalk soils of Picardy.

The Butter Box, Janeville

It is perfectly
empty because
it has been

empty
of butter for
nigh on a century.

Slapped
with the flat
of the hand,

it gives back
the sound of all
it does not contain.



*"That their dust may shield her a nation,
That their souls may enlighten her a sin."*

*"MISEREATUR VESTRI OMNIPOTENS DEUS" – The Last General Absolution of the Maréchal at Rue du Bois
From a Painting by F. Matania*

The Last General Absolution of the Munsters, at Rue du Bois

from a painting by Fortunino Matania

*'Misereatur vestri omnipotens Deus, et dimissis
peccatis vestris, perducatur vos ad vitam aeternam.'*

Were every head to be
ransacked for wrong
and he to listen
to them one by one,

the sun, just rising now,
after a night of rain,
making damp backs steam,
would be gone down.

The horses are the ones
who witness the sun.
They have been so good
they have no reason

to stare at the ground,
as Father Gleeson
raises, above them,
like a gun, his hand.

At the Isle of Man Memorial

His forehead and temples
are in clear shot,
now horizon and parapet
are one and the same.

The seagull who
alights on his fontanel
stares out to sea
for ages without moving.

Douglas, September 2014

Pig Sty, Janeville

Stone-walled, slated, pitched,
this tiny house swept out,
its occupants devoured, brings

that flat country on the outskirts
of Toulouse to mind, in the midst
of sunflower fields, platoons

hanging their black heads,
under the same roof as the sow
who dozed on the far side of a

breeze block wall that trembled
as she breathed, keeping me awake
in the weeks of the *vendange*,

because she was crying
in her sleep, so humanly
and inconsolably, it was

as if grief had waited
until she'd settled for the night
to draw and sink its blade.

Heron

It is the spit
of Rabbi Hillel,
forced

by some toe rag
to recite,
on one foot,

at sword point,
the whole Torah
from memory,

who condensed
it, as it must
ever after

be condensed -
*"Love neighbour.
Love God.*

*The rest
is
commentary."*



The Berry family, Loughcrew, c.1916 (Courtesy of Meath County Archive)

Berry Lodge, Loughcrew, c.1916

Sgt. Harry Albert Berry, London Regt.

Everybody lives eternally
that afternoon, in this frame.
Behind the house, away from
the road, nasturtiums

prosper on a sill in pots,
panes return a shaded light,
creeper seeks a way under
eaves; the children are whole.

Harry has forgotten the pipe
bowl cooling in his palm,
the photographer's request
for stillness, a last smile,

as though he has been
moved to grief and veneration
by the rhythm and tone
of his own citation -

*leaving all that was dear
to him, and passing beyond
the sight of men that others
might live in freedom -*

and glances towards
his mother at her last born
who starts to forget him,
and passes his medals on.



Robert Frederick Kerbey and his father Thomas (Courtesy of the Kerbey family)

The Living Room

for Ruairidh Thornton, at 7 and at 21 & for Rifleman Robert Frederick Kerbey 6924970

When he glanced in
at his grandfather
in the living room,
in his brand-new coffin,

Ruaridh enquired – *“Did Bob
know he was going to die?”* –
as if Death was a visitor
you dressed up for,

and Bob had showered
and shaved, combed his hair,
dried and dressed himself,
climbed in and simply lay down.

Then Ruairidh went one better –
*“I’d love to have a go
in Bob’s coffin for about
twenty minutes”*- as though

time was what we had,
and there was nothing
on this green earth, nothing
that could not be shared.

A Cure, Janeville

For homesickness,
the swish of reeds;

Sweet May for when
the spine plays hell;

for the lungs,
mullein;

for nights when sleep
goes AWOL,

let someone reach down
that fiddle and play

*'The Boesinghe Polka',
'The Winding Road to Slane'.*

North of the Village

He would live on the clippings of tin,
and if he gave the last of a lambing away,
time after time, think no less of him,

for this was good husbandry,
and strong twins fetched a sight more
than a middling threesome at Ardee Fair.

There is a mowing bar leaning in a corner
under a portrait of St. Martin de Porres,
a bearing still in the plastic he bought it in,

parts of the briar pipes he smoked
kept in a biscuit tin in the hopes
of making one decent one,

the insides of carbide lamps
from a life lived in a blackout;
his bed, its wrought iron ends,

as much a machine as the mangle
and the dung spreader manacled
by brambles in the haggard.

The stone path he took to the village
is a strip of high ground now
where spring grass gets it hard to grow.

There is where he dammed the water to wash;
his scythe hangs where he kept it in the thatch.
Birds are plundering the horse's collar

for nesting material, and the handful
of things he hung to dry at the fire
are there yet, dry as a bone.

Out the back pegs survive on a line
tied between trees groaning under fruit.
His damsons are as ripe today as they will ever be.

The Battle for Moscow

As bomb aimers train their eyes to see
their targets as artists might, and keep

their bomb bays closed above the roofs
of the metropolis that cast no shadows,

so the sculptors and artists of Moscow
imagine their real roofs from the air,

and paint by night in the great squares
decoy roofs to draw the bombers away.

Cow

War of Independence, December 1920

When she failed
to answer

the sentry's call
to halt,

and they
dropped her

where she
stood,

her blood
tarred the road

and her milk
surrendered.



HE whom this scroll commemorates
was numbered among those who,
at the call of King and Country, left all
that was dear to them, endured hardness,
faced danger, and finally passed out of
the sight of men by the path of duty
and self-sacrifice, giving up their own
lives that others might live in freedom.
Let those who come after see to it
that his name be not forgotten.

*Serjt. Harry Albert Berry
London Regt.*

Acknowledgements

‘Charles Howard Bury’ was published originally in *The Irish Times*.

‘A Bible in Boyerstown’ owes a debt to Paddy Keely’s *Eskaroon* (Dunderry History Group, 2013), which I am happy to acknowledge here.

For permission to use a number of the historical images which appear in these pages, I am grateful to Meath County Archive.



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His work was awarded the inaugural Ted McNulty Prize and his first collection [*Touching the Bones*](#) (Gallery Press, 2001) was awarded the Forward Prize for First Collection 2002. His second collection [*The Fire Step*](#) was published in October 2009. The poems which make up his previous Smithereens Press publication [*The Night Ahead*](#) were collected in [*Midnightstown*](#), his latest book, which was published in 2014.

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